

Account of Purley on Thames

Bus Services from 1948

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Post War Developments

Immediately after the war there were few alternatives to the buses and they were very heavily patronised. In 1949 Purley Parish Council had to write to Thames Valley to ask for relief buses for the 8 am and 8.30 am services to Reading as they were overcrowded and leaving people at the stops in Purley.

Thames Valley was sold to the British Transport Commission in September 1948 under the terms of the 1947 Transport Act. In March 1950 it also acquired the Newbury and District Motor Services and merged it with Thames Valley. The Newbury company had been formed in July 1932 and had gradually taken over most of the independent operators in the area. It operated through services from Newbury and East Illsley to Reading which also served Purley.

In Summer 1949 the East Illsley service had been service 2 and had occasional trips through from West Illsley. After the take over 100 was added to the Newbury service numbers to distinguish them from the other Thames Valley services. Thus the East Illsley service became service 102 by 1952.

Also in 1950 the South Midlands Omnibus Company was taken over by Thames Valley but retained its separate identity. A consequence was that their two services to Wallingford were made into one continuous service from Reading to Oxford and it was operated by both companies with their buses alternating on the service which retained the number 5.

By the early 1970s the former Newbury services had become the Thames Valley services 130/131 Reading to Newbury via Upper Basildon, Yattendon and Hermitage, 133 Reading to Compton via Ashampstead and 132 Reading to Didcot via Streatley. They operated through Purley via Oxford Road, New Hill, Purley Village, Purley Lane and Reading Road (now Purley Rise), except for the 131 and 132 which followed the main road. At that time Thames Valley were also operating service 5 from Reading to Wallingford and Oxford and the 11a (later 11b) Reading to Tidmarsh both along the main road.

Reorganisation

The 1968 Transport Act saw the formation of the National Bus Company and all stage carriage service except the municipals and a few remaining independents were forcibly amalgamated into one huge Nationalised industry. To preserve some sort of local identity the several regions were allowed to operate under their own name and to choose between four colours for their buses. Thames Valley was merged with the Aldershot and District Motor Services and chose Poppy Red as their colour which was similar to the old Thames Valley livery.

It is not too unfair to observe that the merger was an unqualified disaster, both nationally and locally. What had been a locally run, responsive service was turned into a bureaucratic nightmare with unrealistic financial regulations and a very remote management structure. Its appearance also coincided with a rise in the ownership of private cars and the inability of the buses to respond quickly to changing travel patterns saw a dramatic fall in patronage.

By 1979 the situation had got so bad and National Bus was losing such huge sums of money each year; with Alder Valley one of their worst performers, that they instituted a 'Marketing Analysis Project' (MAP) which took a very hard look at the patterns of service and the potential for new business. In the Reading/Newbury areas generally there was a very severe cut back in services but the no 5 escaped unscathed. The former Newbury and District services were cut back from 15 buses a day through the village to 7 on one service only, the 100, which effectively replaced the 130. The 132 to Didcot and the 11a to Tidmarsh were axed. The new services were marketed under the name 'Kennet Bus' and Alder Valley saw a complete reversal of its fortunes.

The no 5 service operated originally along the main road, but after many years of pressing by the Parish Council, the Alder Valley buses were diverted down New Hill, Purley Village and Purley Lane in 1983, followed by the South Midland buses in 1985. A few years later the no 5 service was diverted again to run up Long Lane and down Knowsley Road.

On 11th April 1983 a new service, the 119, between Reading and the Sava Centre was started. This served Purley via the Oxford Road, New Hill!, Purley Village, Purley Lane and Long Lane. It was immensely popular between Purley and Reading but beyond Long Lane it was very poorly patronised. It was seen very much as a lost leader in a local power struggle between Alder Valley and Reading Corporation Transport. Rivalry grew intense and there was no cooperation between them to the extent that each company erected its own flag poles up Long Lane within inches of each other, and often at different angles giving a very odd effect to the street scene. However in 1984 the two companies signed a coordination agreement with the County Council and both agreed to put their flags on the same pole. As a result the 119 service was abandoned.

On 23rd May 1964 a joint service had been established by Reading Corporation Transport and Thames Valley between Reading station and Long Lane, via Overdown Road. It stopped at a terminus in Highfield Road and returned along Orchard Close. It was the source of numerous complaints from residents of Highfield Road about the oil which dripped onto the road while the buses were waiting and the noise from their idling engines. It was numbered 19 and in 1975, following an agreement sponsored by the County Council was taken over exclusively by Reading Transport. The 19 survived until 14th March 1983 when it was replaced by Reading's service 38 and 39 which extended the journey to the River Estate via Long Lane, Oxford Road, New Hill, St. Mary's Avenue, Colyton Way and Wintringham Way, returning via Chestnut Grove and Brading Way.

The introduction of the 38/39 service was vigorously opposed by some of the residents of the River Estate on the grounds that the roads were too narrow, the buses were noisy and people on the top deck could see into houses. It proved very popular however and soon built up a steady patronage, including most of the erstwhile opponents. During most of week days it was operated as an hourly, limited stop service from the Tilehurst Roundabout into Reading as the number 39 but in the evenings and Sundays as the 38 stopping at all stops in Reading.

After the abandonment of the 119 service the 100 between Reading and Newbury was diverted along Knowsley Road and Long Lane. At the same time Reading Transport introduced the 37 which followed the 38 and 39 as far as Long Lane and then went down Knowsley Road to turn at the roundabout by Goodliffe Gardens. This was a somewhat irregular service, and was confusing in that the 100 and 37 went different directions along Knowsley Road to reach Reading, but the two services built up a solid clientele from the Wimpey Estate.

In 1989 the Reading Transport service to the River Estate was revised to be a half hourly one but at Knowsley Road the service split with half the daytime buses going on the old 39 route and the other half going via Knowsley Road, Oxford Road and New Hill as the new 38. The evening and Sunday services were operated only by the 38 and all buses stopped at all stops en route although at peak times a minimum fare regime operated on journeys out of Reading.

Deregulation

The first deregulation came in 1982 when long range coach services were freed from restrictions. Alder Valley introduced a number of services from the area into London under the brand-name 'Londonlink', one of which, the X5, operated from Purley. It started from Purley Village, running via the Oxford Road via Tilehurst to Calcot and the M4. It was extended to Pangbourne two years later but this lasted for only about a year when it reverted to starting from Purley. There was only one coach a day which left Purley at 6.30 am returning about 6.30 pm. It was quite popular and took a small amount of commuter traffic from British Rail.

Full scale deregulation came in 1986 on the passing of the 1985 Transport Act. This divided bus services into two groups, contract and commercial. The commercial services were those which a bus operator believed it could operate with its own resources without a public subsidy. They had to be registered as such and vehicles had to be inspected for safety etc. The Contract services were those which a Local Authority wished to see provided, but for which there was no registered operator. In this case the Authority could ask for tenders against a defined level of service to which any qualified operator could respond.

On the local scene Reading Transport registered all their routes as 'commercial' but Alder Valley registered only the off-peak weekday no 5 service. As a consequence the County Council offered the 100 service and the remaining 5 services for tender. The result was that Alder Valley won the 100 weekday service which was operated mainly only between Pangbourne and Reading and the weekday peak number 5. The Sunday service was awarded to White's Coaches of Tadley who operated between Reading and Pangbourne as the 505. It was never well patronised and survived only for two years. In 1989 the contract was re-let and this time Bee Line won, but they could not attract sufficient patronage. Finally in June 1990 the County Council decided. it was not worth subsidising any longer and the Sunday service was discontinued. A year later a similar decision was taken about the evening no 5 services.

The Alder Valley Company was split up in 1985 with the former Thames Valley becoming known as Alder Valley North and virtually independent of the Aldershot services. In early 1987 it became the Berkshire and Buckinghamshire Bus Company with the Trade name Bee Line. Its vehicles changed from the old poppy red livery to a bright yellow and deep red livery which always looked very tatty. In December 1987 it was sold to Len Wright Travel as a going concern with around 200 buses. Len Wright, who lived at Bucklebury had been running his own travel company since 1976 and had a fleet of 35 coaches and 15 buses based at Isleworth when he bought Bee Line. Under his aegis there were no major changes to the services through Purley.

In April 1988 the Bee Line had a major catastrophe when an arsonist burnt down the garage in Newbury along with many of their buses. Luckily the fire occurred on a Sunday and by the Monday Bee Line were flooded with offers of help and support from other bus companies who loaned or leased buses to them. Miraculously no service hours were lost, but Purley was to see a motley collection of buses bearing logos from as far afield as 'London Country' and 'De Cymru' In addition the Careline bus which had been specially adapted to carry disabled passengers often appeared on the 100 service.

School Bus Services

Children from Purley Village School were taken by bus to Pangbourne from 1925 when it was decided to make it a school for children up to eight years only. The service was initially provided free by the County Council but later parents had to pay as the journey was less than the statutory three miles. It was operated for many years by a local carrier, Mr Lee of Horseshoe Rd, Pangbourne. He operated a very strict regime and any child who misbehaved was liable to be turned off and made to walk. The service was discontinued in 1966 when Long Lane School was opened.

Services to Theale Green School and Little Heath School were provided under contract to Berkshire County Council for many years by Pangbourne coaches. Later they were made stage carriage services with the County Council providing a free pass to those who lived more than three miles away from school. It was therefore available for those who lived less than three miles and were willing to pay. They were also nominally available to members of the public but it is doubtful whether anyone else ever availed themselves of the services.

When Pangbourne Coaches went out of business in March 1985, replacement services were provided by Reading Transport who initially operated the 89 from Purley to Little Heath, the 88a to Theale Green via Pangbourne and the 88c to Theale Green via Tilehurst. Denefield School was already well served by the 37 and 39 services and so no special arrangements had to be made initially although Reading Transport operated special afternoon buses for the children which started from the school.

The services have been modified over the years and Denefield pulled its hours forward in order to get a better service for its pupils. In 1995, as well as the regular 38/39 service there was a special 91 from Coley Park to Denefield which also serves Prospect and Meadway Schools., an extra 110 service brought children from the Oxford Road area of Reading and a linking service (the 85) left Denefield at 0830 running to Little Heath and St Paul's Schools. Two service 89 buses operate to Theale Green School via Purley and Pangbourne. One starts on the Overdown Road and the other at Purley Post Office. There was also an extra 39 service starting at Denefield in the afternoon.

By 2007 the pattern had settled down to the 88 and 89 running a circular route to Theale Green, Denefield and Little Heath to serve children from Theale, Pangbourne, Purley and Birch Copse with an extra 38 along the Oxford Road to get children to and from Denefield. The 31 had a few extra services starting at Denefield to provide the main scheduled service for children from Tilehurst.

Several private schools in the area run their own special buses which pass through Purley to pick up children in the morning and return them at night. There has also been a bus from Purley for children attending Englefield Primary School paid for by the parents. This was dropped after a boy was killed after getting off the bus at Purley Post Office and dashing across the road. It also coincided with a large drop in the number of Purley children attending Englefield.

Other Bus Services

Over the years there have been many companies who operated contract buses for their employees which passed through Purley. This has included the Atomic Establishments at Aldermaston and Harwell. Also G Percy Trenthams provided minibuses to pick up employees and deliver them to Purley and when they moved to Theale it picked up in Purley to take employees to Theale.

In early 1988 Reading Transport won a contract with Southern Electricity to run a bus service from Reading to Newbury each morning as they had closed their Reading office and moved all the staff to Newbury. This ran via the Oxford Road to the Purley roundabout, up Knowsley Road and thence via the A4 to Newbury. It picked up at Knowsley Road at 0815 and they used the Gold Line coaches for the trip.

An interesting innovation was the introduction of the Ridgeway Explorer in May 1994. This ran through the summer offering 4 buses each Sunday each way between Reading and Swindon via Purley, Streatley, Goring, Illsley and Wantage. It was designed to encourage walkers on the Ridgeway to take a bus to their starting point and from their finishing point. When the service resumed in May 1995 an arrangement had been reached with British Rail to give discounts to holders of rail tickets. It was operated initially by Regis Coaches as their X47 service. It proved remarkably popular and under the joint aegis of Berkshire, Oxfordshire and Wiltshire County Councils has operated each summer (to date 2002) as the X48 service. In some years it ran through from Reading to Swindon and in other years the two halves met at Wantage.

Another Regis Service was the R11 which ran on Mondays from Wantage to Reading town centre via Harwell, Didcot, Streatley and Pangbourne, continuing then to the Savacentre, allowing two and half hours to shop there before the return journey. Although it passes through Purley it was not scheduled to stop there.

ReadiBus

ReadiBus was established under a special Urban Aid grant to provide transport for the disabled in Reading. In 1985 it extended its operations to take in Purley and gained financial support from Newbury District Council. In return District Councillor John Chapman was appointed one of its Directors. It operates a number of specially adapted minibuses one of which was provided Newbury District Council in 1984. The service is run on a book and ride basis and is available to those who are not able to use ordinary public transport due to disability.

In 1990 a new type of service was offered, the Regular Run, whereby a particular type of journey was made on specified days Thus there were 'regular runs' to Reading Town Centre on one day and to the Savacentre on another.

The service has continued to flourish with considerable expansions into West Berkshire and weekly 'scheduled' services from Goring via Streatley and Pangbourne but although passing through Purley did not stop to pick up here.

Reading and Newbury Buses

Reading Buses had its origins in the Reading Tramway Company which opened a 2.5 mile, 4 ft. gauge horse tramway in 1879 between Cemetery Junction and Brock Barracks. This was purchased by Reading Corporation in 1901. They electrified and extended the tramway system. Trams continued to run in Reading until May 1939.

Motor buses were introduced in December 1919. Further expansion over the years brought Reading services come out as far as the Roebuck by July 1926. Trolley buses were introduced in May 1936 and rapidly replaced the trams. Expansion of the trolley network to Kentwood caused the abandonment of the Roebuck service in July 1944. Trolley bus service itself ceased in November 1968 when all services were now handled by motor buses, mainly double deckers.

Municipal control ceased in October 1986 when Reading Transport Ltd was formed, albeit still wholly owned by Reading Borough Council. It had to operate as an ordinary commercial company as a consequence of the 1985 Transport Act. In 1990 the name 'Reading Buses' was adopted bringing yet another livery change.

In 1991 Reading Buses bought out the Newbury and Reading operations of the Bee Line. Bee Line Buses based in Reading were repainted in the new Reading Buses livery, except for a few which were scrapped. The improvement in appearance was staggering and they immediately looked much smarter and newer. Those based in Newbury became 'Newbury Buses' and were repainted in a similar livery but with a green strip replacing the red of Reading Buses. The fleet of Leyland National single deckers was refurbished and the buses re-engined with Volvo engines. The Bristol VRT double deckers were also re-furbished and further examples of both types were bought in to supplement the rural fleet. All the Reading based buses were transferred to the main Mill Lane depot and the former Bee Line depot is now the Reading Buses Engineering Works.

In order to avoid confusion the 5 service to Oxford was renumbered 105, thus keeping all rural route numbers above 100 to differentiate them from town routes. In April 1995 by agreement with Oxford Buses, the joint operation ceased and Reading and Oxford each operated to Wallingford with timetables adjusted so that through journeys could be made by changing at Wallingford.

A new 199 Service from Upper Basildon to Reading was introduced in 1994 as a variant of the 110.

This ran via Grovelands Road, Waverley Road, Tilehurst Rd, Liebenrood Road and Bath Road to provide 'get to work' opportunities for people working in the west of Reading. especially some hospital workers.

Reading Mainline

In 1994 Reading Buses were given a severe jolt when a new company, run by one of its former chief executives, Royston Jenkins, set up in Reading to run competitive services. They bought a fleet of old Routemaster buses from London Transport and these proved very popular with the public as they were operated with conductors and had an open platform at the back which made boarding very much quicker than on the Reading buses. Their first service was the A which ran between Whitley and Tilehurst via the town centre.

One of the first effects was they they went to Reading Borough Council and demanded £500,000 as compensation for accepting their oap passes, which they were empowered to do by the 1985 Act. This caused shock waves to reverberate throughout the Reading Council / Reading Buses hierarchy as they were not only faced with competition but had to subsidise it into the bargain. They responded by running some very uncommercial services timed to arrive just before the Mainline buses.

Nevertheless Reading Mainline flourished and bought many more buses and pioneered many new routes. The service D was introduced to Purley in 1998 and operated from the Sherwood Rise roundabout via Knowsley Road, Long Lane, Dark Lane, Pierces Hill, The Triangle, Curwen Road, Tilehurst Road, Russel Street and the town centre finishing up at the Royal Berks Hospital. This proved quite popular with the public, especially as it was a somewhat faster route to town than the Reading buses.

The service however appeared very scruffy. The buses were old and clapped out and most of the drivers and conductors were unkempt. There were also many complaints about the crew using the back of the bus shelter on Purley Rise as a toilet. However it was a very cheerful service and filled a niche. During Mainlines' period of operation it ran to a half hour frequency but only at off peak times Monday to Friday.

In 1999 Reading buses bought out Mainline but maintained their services and buses for another 18 months at a depot on Cardiff Road. At the end of this period however the buses were sold off and the conductors retrained as drivers as Reading Buses' major problem was their inability to recruit drivers because of the high cost of living in the Reading area.

Purley Buses at the Millennium

When the time came to phase out the Mainline buses it was decided to recast the services to retain the new markets which Mainline had pioneered. At Purley the D service was retitled 31 and the 38 was rerouted to take in the terminus on Purley Rise. The route of both services ran for a short distance along the Oxford Road, down New Hill, around the river estate, back up New Hill and then via Knowsley Road and Long Lane to Dark Lane. Here they split with the 38 going down Overdown Road and the 31 up Pierces Hill. However both services operated to an hourly schedule separated by half an hour giving a half hourly service to the town centre. The 39 by this time was reduced to four buses a day serving the lower part of Long Lane. Reading Buses would have liked to have gone down Purley Lane and through Purley Village to the River Estate but their buses were so much bigger than the old Thames Valley vehicles that this proved impossible and they tended to bottom out on the right angle bends and often could not navigate between parked cars.

However Long Lane still retained the 105 service which had its ups and downs. The arrangements with Oxford Bus were terminated and they reverted to meeting in Wallingford instead of through running between Oxford and Reading. Then Oxford Bus gave up their half of the service and for a very short time Reading Buses ran through. However patronage had all but disappeared and Reading

Buses curtailed the service at Pangbourne, retaining the hourly frequency off peak as a subsidised service. One service designated 106 ran via Purley Village in the morning around 9 am but as there was no return journey it was not very useful. Eventually in Spring 2002 the 105 was taken out of service permanently, being replaced by an off peak service run by Thames Travel.

Thames Travel was based in Wallingford and began their service to Purley with the 132 from RAF Benson to Savacentre via Pangbourne and Long Lane. It was very irregular and poorly advertised. When the 105 was dropped however, they were subsidised by West Berkshire Council to operate a service to Reading and ran four buses each way through Purley following the A329 and did not pick up en route after Purley.

Starting 4th October 2001 Reading Buses began a night service. This had been requested by and was subsidised by Reading Borough Council. One of these routes served Purley, the N9. It came along the Oxford Road, then via Grosvenor Road, Dee Road, Tilehurst Road, St Michaels Road, Pierces Hill, Dark Lane, Long Lane Knowsley Road, Tilehurst Station and back into town along the A329. It ran one way only leaving Reading at xx:30 from 20:30 to 00:30 weekdays and 03:30 Fridays Saturdays and Sundays.

Another odd service was the football special from Purley to the Madjeski Stadium on days when Reading were playing at home. Designated the 77 it started at Purley.

After many months of deliberations and many rumours and counter rumours Reading Buses finally announced their proposals for a complete recast of their services in the Greater Reading Area to take effect on October 28th 2002.

Insofar as Purley was concerned the service improved considerably. The 39 was dropped entirely and the 38 became an evening only service running from Reading along the Oxford Road from 19:15 to 23:00 on weekdays and from 0810 to 23:00 Sundays. It did not take the loop at Sherwood Rise and went straight down to Chestnut Grove. An additional 38 ran in the morning to pick up students for Denefield School

The 31 however was increased in frequency to 20 minutes, leaving Purley Post Office at xx:08, xx:28 and xx:48 with some slight variations at peak hours from 06:14 to 19:32. It followed the old route from Purley Post Office but at the Triangle went via the Meadway and Dee Road estate rather than via Curwen Road and Tilehurst Road and finished at Reading station rather than the Royal Berks Hospital.

Earlier there had been changes to the fares structure when zonal fares were introduced in June 2001. There were 4 zones, Central Reading coming out as far as Reading West Station, Inner Reading coming out to Norcot, Outer Reading to Tilehurst Station and The Triangle and Greater Reading coming out to Purley Post Office. At first there were 4 fares depending upon how many zones you crossed but this was later rationalised to 1, 2 or 3, and 4. A range of daily and weekly tickets were also developed and for Purley the daily ticket, known as a 'Busabout' was a real bargain as at £2.20 it was cheaper than two singles (£1.20 each) and had the flexibility that you could change buses at will or stop off en route. This overcame many of the objections to the withdrawal of the Oxford Road services and through journey to the Royal Berks as it was quite a simple job to change buses at the Triangle for Oxford Road and at the Station for the Royal Berks.

A further change was introduced in November 2002 when the Vault system was introduced. This required the passenger to put exact money into a glass box with no change being given. The main purpose was to speed up boarding but it had the added benefit that the driver could no longer be mugged for the money.

The 2000 Transport Act had required Local Authorities to offer a half price bus pass to all its senior citizens. At first it was feared that this would see the end of the West Berkshire tokens which had

been issued since 1985 but at the last minute the Government slipped in a Clause which enabled pensioners to forego their rights to a pass in favour of tokens. As it turned out over 90% of the residents of West Berkshire opted for the tokens and hardly any from Purley opted for the pass.

In 2006 however the rules changed again and Districts were obliged to offer a free bus pass to all its eligible senior citizens. The deal negotiated by West Berkshire allowed users from the Purley and Tilehurst area to travel on any of the routes along the Bath Road (A4), the Oxford Road (A329) and Tilehurst Road and then on to the Royal Berkshire Hospital from Reading Station. As a result the number of passes increased substantially. The period of validity however started in April which created some confusion with the tokens which started in July so from 2007 the tokens were issued in April.

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